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ABSTRACT

Many public and private kindergartens in New York use standardized tests for admission into their programs. How parents and teachers feel about these tests was studied. Parents were asked whether their child had taken any standardized kindergarten admission test, whether they discussed the results with a professional, whether the results really reflected the child, whether the testing process was stressful for the child, and whether the child was accepted into the school. Eighteen of 20 parents responded to a questionnaire, and 16 of them were interviewed. All said their children were accepted into the program, although two chose other alternatives. All the children had taken Stanford-Binet or Educational Research Bureau tests. All but two families had received an oral or written report from a testing professional. Most parents thought that the test had been more stressful for them than for the child. Whether the parent thought the test was really predictive of academic success seemed to depend on the child's performance on the test. Ten teachers who were asked about the tests were aware of the many variables that could affect scores and were wary about the practice of testing children at such a young age. Reliance on early childhood test results may mean that schools are forgetting what early childhood education really is. (Contains 13 references.) (SLD)

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by Nancy Pike

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To Test or Not To Test: That is the Question

by Nancy Pike

According to Dr. William Randall, a Commissioner of Education for the State of Colorado, "To solely use standardized achievement tests is like casting a net into the sea -- a net that is intentionally designed to let the most interesting fish get away. Then, to describe the ones that are caught strictly in terms of their weight and length is to radically reduce what we know about them. To further conclude that all the contents of the sea consist of fish like these in the net compounds the error further. We need more kinds of fish," he continues. "We need to know more about those we catch. We need new nets."

So why do so many New York City public and private kindergartens require standardized tests for admission into their programs? Do these tests accurately reflect the intelligence, skills and potential of the children taking them and do they predict what kind of a student each will eventually become? Or are they a "net" that screens out some children, and if so, why would a business that claims it wants to educate children -- a school -- not want the challenge of working with many different kinds of learners? Perhaps more to the point, why do schools embrace a practice in which young children are subjected to what many professionals feel is a developmentally-inappropriate practice, one in which there are so many variables that is is all but impossible to get an adequate rendering of a four- or five-year old?

How do the parents of these children approach and evaluate these tests? How do the teachers who have youngsters in their early-childhood programs feel about the children being "graded" and considered for admission into kindergarten programs according to how they have performed on a standardized test?

A Review of the Literature

A father of a bright four-year-old accompanied her to a testing site for the Stamford-Binet exam. When he took her back to her own pre-K class he smiled wearily at her teacher. "It was painful," he said, "to watch her unable to answer all the questions I know she knows the answers to."

A handbook to acquaint parents with tests defines standardized testing as that which "refers to the standard or uniform conditions under which a test was developed and is to be administered" (Boehm and White, 1982, p. 10). Dr. Robert McCall explains in a 1988 article in Parents Magazine (p. 129) that "the Stanford-Binet [test] dominated mental testing for two decades, until psychologist David Wechsler created his tests, which now include the Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scale of Intelligence (WPPSI), the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC), and the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale (WAIS). The history is important," he continues, "because it shows that IQ tests were originally created not to measure the abstract concept of 'intelligence,' but for the practical purpose of predicting traditional school performance. They do this quite well," claims McCall, "although some children perform better or worse in school than the tests suggest. They predict other skills and abilities less accurately. So, if your child does not score very well on an IQ test, he or she may still be reasonably successful at school and perhaps exceptional at art, music, mechanics, computers, electronics, dance, and many other skills..." (p. 129).

"One father asked rather plaintively, "What is it that they're looking for – pre-matured children?"

"For New York City's independent schools, the ERB administers a collection of tests that sound like kitchen appliance attachments," wrote Catherine Hausman and Victoria Goldman in their 1994 guide for families (p. 21), but it is the Stamford-Binet test that is used currently used to determine a child's eligibility into a gifted and talented

program in Manhattan's public schools or the prestigious Hunter College Elementary School.

Julius and Zelda Segal point out that "many children achieve much more than expected based on their intelligence test scores simply because their motivation, interests, intellectual fervor, and overall drive are so high" (Segal and Segal, 1987, p. 118). Francis Roberts, Ed.D., advises parents to "not make a decision based exclusively on the results of screening tests. There is no one objective test for school readiness," cautioned the superintendent of several towns in Long Island, New York. "The experience of the evaluator, and local norms for the screening, vary. Thus, the same child may seem more or less ready depending on who is evaluating the test, and a child who is typical for her age in one setting may seem less ready when compared with children in another setting. Also, the level of a child's performance can vary from day to day; if she feels tired or has a slight cold, for example, these factors may affect how she does on the test. The testing environment may also influence her performance" (Roberts, 1992, p. 72). If parents take advice from these educators into consideration they might wonder why it is that experts estimate that about half of all pre-kindergarten children now receive some kind of testing (Rubenstein, 1989, p. 75).

While the word "standardized also implies that the ***same*** set of instructions must be given to all children without changes in wording by the [tester]" (Boehm and White, 1982, p. 10), there is just no possible way for the conditions to be the same when the test is given in dozens of sites around New York by many different professionals. In addition, another requirement is that the test be given under invariable conditions, "resulting in a uniform way to give the test so that all children have the same chance" (p. 11). But in New York City the sites and ambient factors are so varied that one child might be taking the test in his own school library and another might be traveling across a borough to a strange school or office setting. In addition, one child might be tested at nine a.m., while

another would be scheduled for a four p.m. session after a day at pre-school. Would even the same child perform identically in such different circumstances?

A four-year-old girl after sitting through approximately half of a standardized test, asked her tester when they were going to get to the "kid stuff".

Many ongoing schools in New York City use the test given by the Educational Research Bureau -- the ERBs -- to help decide which applicants will be accepted into their programs even though research has proven that "it is always more reliable to predict group behavior than individual behavior" (Boehm and White, p. 25). In addition, "the younger the age of testing, the less reliable the score" (p.26). "A score at 4 or 5 [years of age] is not a reliable predictor of performance at 10 or 12, not only because the child is young, but because a lot of changes occur between age 4 and age 10..., as any parent knows" (p. 26). Among many of the criticisms of testing, one is the concern with how "tests are used in evaluation.... It is important to know that tests are limited. They sample one slice of behavior at one point in time. They are fallible, and any evaluation based on test scores must take that fact into account" (Gellman, 1995, p. 3). Is it possible, then, that these New York City schools are overusing these tests? Extensive studies with older students have indicated that "no matter how strong a relationship exists between test performance and [school] achievement, there is no guarantee that a student who does poorly on the test (SATs) won't be an A+ student in college or, similarly, that a student with a top score on the test won't drop out of [school] for failing grades" (p. 6).

A SURVEY FOR PARENTS AND TEACHERS

*Marc, an articulate, passionate, four-year-old, upon being told that his dad was taking him to a testing site: "They're going to ask me what's up and what's down, what's right and what's left, and **I'm not going to tell them!**"*

Throughout New York City, young children are taking standardized readiness tests that are then being used to screen and predict what kind of students they will become. Will they be able to perform to a school's expectations and desires? Are they among the "gifted and talented"? If it is true that "no matter how appropriate the content of the test appears to be, a test cannot be a valid aptitude test unless [it] is a good predictor of the performance it purports to predict" (Gellman, p. 16), then why do these schools continue to use the testing process? Is it a stressful experience for the children and their parents and, if so, was it all worth the stress? Were these children admitted into the schools of their (parents') choice and, if so, was it the right choice?

To try to get some answers to these perplexing questions, I sent a questionnaire to twenty parents of former pupils, and to ten pre-K teachers who work in five different schools.

The questions asked of parents were as follows:

- Did your child take the ERBs or any other standardized test for admission into a New York City private or public kindergarten?
- Did you receive the results of the test?
- Did you discuss the results with a professional in order to better understand them?
- How do you feel about the process of testing young children?
- Do you believe that the results of the test reflect your child and how he or she will perform in school?
- In retrospect, was the testing process stressful to your child? To you? If so, was it worth the stress?
- Was your child accepted into the school of your choice?

I had neither anticipated how quickly many of the parents would answer, nor how eager many would be to talk about the testing experience. Eighteen of the twenty

questionnaires were sent or brought back with written answers, although I had told parents I'd contact them by phone to talk at a later date. In the end I was able to talk to sixteen parents, including some who had written answers. All of those surveyed had children who had taken either the ERBs or the Stamford-Binets and have children who are currently in kindergarten or grade school or had spent time in New York City public or private kindergartens. All said their children were accepted into the school or program of their choice, although two chose alternatives, one moving out of the city to the suburbs.

All except two families had received either written results or an oral report from the tester or a professional with a background in early childhood such as the director of their child's nursery school. The two who hadn't explained that the evaluation costs "extra," and they didn't feel they could afford the added expense. "It's nice to hear the results," one parent explained, "when they're good."

> *"When Elizabeth's mother was still with her, the tester asked her to draw a picture and put her name on it," one father said. "She did. Then the four-year-old said to the tester, "I have problems with math."*

Many parents felt that the test was more stressful for them than for their children. Several felt it was a terrible experience for their child to have to undergo, a few that their children had actually liked the challenge.

The responses to the question of how a parent felt about a standardized test for four- and five-year-olds were as follows:

"Awful," "dry," "ridiculous," "not very useful," "not indicative," "not damaging," "couldn't quantify child's intelligence," "not valuable," "nearly useless," and "irritating."

However, the answers to the question of whether or not a parent felt that the test could predict a child's future school performance often seemed to be dependent on the child's performance on the test itself. A number of parents felt that the test

underestimated the child or didn't catch how a particular child's mind worked. The tester of one little boy thought it remarkable that he was the only child in many years to have noticed a thermometer in her room, yet gave him a poor evaluation because he was not always cooperative about answering test questions.

> *"But four-year-old kids are wild cards," wrote one mother, "and wonderfully so. They have creative/social/intuitive gifts that are immeasurable and that may turn out to make them remarkable students much later."*

Others, especially those whose children were later diagnosed with deficits or disabilities, believed that test results were "180° different" from the child. "The test did not pick up an auditory deficit," one mother explained, "and misdiagnosed a spatial inability." One father explained that the test in no way reflects the difficulties a bright child may have, nor can it predict motivation or the lack thereof. Many parents rued the fact that the tests, which measure verbal and spatial abilities, did not pick up on other talents. "I don't know what they wanted," another dad complained. "She [the tester] asked Jonathan to repeat a story she had told. He did, but then he embellished. When she tried again, he did some more verbal embroidering. So she told me he wasn't ready to take the test." Another boy was, according to the evaluation given by an ERB tester, "sidetracked by questions that reminded him of other experiences and thoughts and he required occasional refocusing." Yet a question often asked of teachers for ongoing-school reports is whether a child makes connections to outside experiences when learning about something in school.

The questions asked of the teachers were:

- Have you known many children who have taken the ERBs or any other standardized tests for admission into a NYC private or public kindergarten?
- Did you see the results of any of these tests?
- Did parents ever discuss the results with you?

- How do you feel about the process of testing young children? Do you believe the results of the test reflect the child or how he or she will perform in school?
- Does the pre-school in which you teach require any testing for admission?
- Do you think testing four- and five-year-olds is a developmentally-appropriate practice?

Although none of the schools these teachers currently worked in required any kind of testing for their pre-school program, all had worked with children who had taken a standardized test for admission into a kindergarten program. Indeed, one told a story of a parent who "beat the system" by not having the report sent anywhere but home. Her son took the Stamford-Binet exam three times, after which he finally scored well enough to be declared eligible for the Gifted and Talented program in Manhattan's District 3.

Eight of the ten teachers had seen written reports when the parents brought them to discuss at conference time.

> *In 1970, five-year-old Nina was shown what was clearly a drawing of the moon in the sky. She was asked "Is it daytime or is it nighttime?" Nina had seen the moon many times, both during the day and in the evening. She refused to pick one answer, even though she knew what was expected of her. In 1996, when asked if she remembered the incident, Nina replied that she did. "You know," she said, "I still remember being sure that it was a trick question."*

Teachers often speak of the "limitations of standardized testing, of how little such tests [add] to what they already knew about the child, of the highly specific isolated nature of the information obtained" (Genishi, 1992, p.91). Survey answers to the question of how they felt about testing four-year-olds in general ranged from "highly inappropriate," "developmentally inappropriate," "too many variables to be accurate," "ridiculous at this age," "not really reflective," "often not reliable," "inconsistent," and "not a measure of cognitive abilities."

All ten teachers mentioned the variable factors that could affect scores. These ranged from a tester's personality and rapport with a child and the space in which the test is given, to how a child is feeling on the day of the test and at what time the test is administered. One teacher knew a child who had to take a long subway ride at the end of his own school day, and balked when it came time to enter the test room. The same child performed splendidly on a Saturday morning, even after the long trip. Another, who taught for many years and now meets with parents regularly in her job as the director of a nursery school, said that "frequently the advice from the tester is outweighed by the trauma and all the tension and misunderstanding it creates for the parents." A teacher of a particularly well-centered, kind, creative and imaginative child was upset to hear that the little girl's parents were "disappointed in her" when they received what they found to be "very confusing, uneven scores. Less pernicious but still not good," she continued, "is when the parents blame themselves."

"Why do schools want to test how well a child does on a test?" one teacher rued. On the other hand, children's baby-sitters have been heard boasting about the scores of their charges.

Sue Bredekamp, PhD., who in 1989 was director of professional development at the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), "agree[d] that readiness tests 'should be designed to see that programs adjust to children rather than that children adjust to programs'" (Rubenstein, 1989, p.81). Is it possible that the idea is so threatening to the existence of the schools and their programs that they've chosen to forget what early childhood education is all about?

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